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The Right of Freedom

The Bulletin of the Human Rights Centre "Spring '96"



Friendship Which Does Not Exist...

One year ago, April 2, 1997, during the celebration of the first anniversary of the signing the treaty of a Union between Belarus and Russia they broke a glass for happiness as well as any hope that Belarus would manage to avoid totalitarianism, unlimited power concentrated in the hands of one man, in its development. By signing the treaty with Lukashenka Russia, in fact, recognised the legitimacy of his authority following the November coup (1996) which was condemned by world society. By doing this Russia closed its eyes to violations of human rights in Belarus and did not listen to the voice of reason and voices of its educated people (intelligentsia) but believed the old myth about the desire of our people to live in a united country while politicians alone resolved their little problems before elections and others thinking about their "perspective" tasks. Nobody cared about the negative attitude of the Belarusian people to such a forced union and to political games far reaching plans of those kings for a day. In the meantime demonstrations of the opposition were underway in Minsk as well as arrests and beatings of demonstrators.

On 1 April, the departure of the Belarusian delegation to Moscow for signature of a treaty ended in an action of protest under the name "Garbus - 97" (Pumpkin - 97) (according to Belarusian custom, the bride gives a pumpkin to the groom when she refuses to marry him). During this action about ten demonstrators were arrested.

On the following day, 2 April, demonstrations took place in protest of the union. After a meeting, 5000 demonstrators, mostly young people, marched to the Russian Embassy in Minsk in order to express their disagreement with the signing of the treaty. By the Russian Embassy demonstrators bumped into militia cordons which forced demonstrators into yards and started beating and arresting them. About 200 people were detained. Most active were groups called "for recognition and detainment" in civilian clothes. They arrested people not only at the place of the event but in public transport, in shops and cafes and on their way home.

Consequently, many people got into preliminary wards and local police stations just because they were speaking Belarusian,

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Chronicle

On 9 March, the Union of Entrepreneurs in Grodno was denied the right to hold a meeting on 15 March on the Constitution Day of Belarus.

On 13 March, the chairman of Polotsk City Executive Committee K. Khomich, giving no reason, forbade the Polotsk Rada of the Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne" to picket in connection with the 80th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic.

On 13 March the picket organised by the wife of Supreme Soviet Deputy A. Klimau - who was arrested without charges and is now in prison - was broken up by the militia.

On 14 March, the Attorney's Office of Mogilev began a criminal investigation anti-presidential slogans were found on city walls.

On 14 March, the United Citizen's Party held a picket in defence of Human Rights in Belarus.

On 15 March, the opposition held a meeting in honour of Constitution Day of Belarus, a constitution that was illegally liquidated by president A. Lukashenka. After the meeting, the chairman of Belarusian Social-Democrats Party M. Statkevich was taken in by militia. He is said to have been shouting slogans defaming the honour and dignity of those in higher service to the country.

On 16 March, in Slonim of Grodno Region, the chairman of Slonim City Executive Committee Aleg Laktsyoshyn, without giving a reason, forbade Slonim Rada of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne" to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Belarusian People's Republic in the House of Culture.

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TRIAL FOR "GRAFFITI"

THREE MINSK STUDENTS WERE ARRESTED WHILE WRITING ANTI-PRESIDENTIAL SLOGANS

It happened 28 February of this year. The results of the court cases of V. Labkovich and A. Shydlousky were known and it was already understood that authorities, in their aspiration to liquidate the unique youth resistance, would stop at nothing... But the youth were not planning to give up: cruelty of authorities did not frighten them, the number of anti-presidential slogans written on walls has not diminished, Therefore we should expect more arrests and more "criminal" cases...

In the last days of February, in Minsk, in the act of writing anti-presidential slogans in spray paint, militia arrested three students: eighteen year olds Alesya Mukhina and Andrei Gulevich and their seventeen year old friend. After being held for three days they were accused of malicious hooliganism (article 201 part 1 of Belarusian Criminal Code). During the investigation the charges were requalified as part 2 of the same article - under which the students are threatened with up to five years imprisonment. The guys were released from the isolation ward before the trial under the condition that they do not leave the city of Minsk.

It also seems that the rector of Belarusian State University of Electronics and Computer Sciences, V. Il'yin, not waiting for the case to end and sentence to be announced, expelled students A. Mukhina and A. Gulevich for "violating norms of conduct in public places". The basis for this was, as written in the order, "information from Department of Internal Affairs of Minsk Central District № MG 15/29 from 18 March, 1998, explanations of the students, agreement of the Students' Committee, view of the Dean of the faculty, decision of the board of rectors from 18.03.98."

...Authorities will continue to aspire to change political cases to criminal cases. They say never enter the same river twice. That is true. But one can step twice on one and the same rake...

SPRING HAS COME TO BELARUS

On 22 March, in Minsk, a procession and meeting took place for the 80 the anniversary of the creation 25 March, 1918 of the Belarusian People's Republic. Demonstrators gathered at Yakub Kolas Square and walked along Skariny Avenue and sidewalk accompanied by a band. Above the columns waved white-red-white flags as well as slogans, the main one of which was "BPF - our future in the 21st century!".



Photo: The celebration proceeds through Minsk

The meeting took place at the Parizhskai Komuni square near the opera and ballet theatre. About ten thousand people participated in the event, those who gave speeches - including Yu. Belen'ki, A. Sidarevich, S. Shushkevich, L. Barschevski, A. Byalyatski, P. Sevyarynits and others, called upon Belarusians for solidarity in order to defend the sovereignty of the country and fight the dictatorship.

Acting Chairman of the BPF Lyavon Barschevski reminded those present that 22 March is a tragic day in the history of Belarus. It was on that day in 1864 that the leader of the 1863-63 anti-Russian revolt Kastus' Kalinovski was executed in Vilnius, on that very day in 1943 members of the punitive expedition burned the village of Khatyn... A minute of silence of all participants of the meeting was held in honour of the memory of all who have died for the independence of their motherland.

A resolution was taken at the meeting in which a separate point set up demands to the Belarusian authorities about observing human rights and freedom of speech in the country, about the immediate freeing of all political prisoners.

Representatives of tens of Belarusian cities traditionally took part in the celebrations in Minsk.

After the meeting the group of determined young people cried out anti-presidential slogans and then moved in the direction of Skarina Avenue. There they had a run-in with a cordon of militiamen and special forces. Consequently about thirty demonstrators, journalists and observers from human rights organisations were arrested (the list of those detained is printed in this bulletin on page 6).

The celebration of the anniversary of Belarusian People's Republic took place in all oblast centres and big regional cities of Belarus. According to preliminary data, those who organised the demonstrations in Gomel and Mogilev were arrested.

Staff Correspondent

FREEDOM TO CREATIVITY IS BANNED

Exhibitions of creative association of Belarusian artists "Pagonya" have been opened for many years already. On 25 March, the biggest event of the Belarusian people - the day of will. Opening on that day has become a tradition so has the objections of authorities to exhibited works and closures ahead of schedule. Last year, the permission to open an exhibition was received at the last minute and this year the authorities did not permit artists to show their works in the House of Art.

For several months correspondence between authorities and leadership of "Pagonya" was underway. There was no result because the artists were not permitted to use the space.

Why do the authorities not like the members of the associations? Because they have their own civil position, courage in arts and defend Belarusian tradition in arts and for patriotism which is called by authorities nationalism.

Nonetheless, the exhibition took place - six of them: in Minsk, at the headquarters of BPF and in one of the halls of the red Catholic church, in Molodechno, Grodno, Pinsk and Brussels.

In Brussels, an exhibition was held in the office of civil organisation "Charter 97". In the ceremonial opening of that exhibition, representatives of European Parliament took part as well as members of the European Commission. They got acquainted with the works of modern Belarusian painting as well as the latest events in Minsk: arrests and detention on 22 March, about trials of demonstrators.

So they preserved the tradition. The association "Pagonya" celebrated the day of will by showing new works of their members. And it is for the better that there were six exhibitions. Minsk is not the only place that could hold an exhibition. Belarus lives even far away from the capital.

WILL EUROPE HELP US?

The well-know politician Genadz Grushavy, returning to Minsk after almost a year's absence, is considering continuing to head the fund "For the Children of Chernobyl." At the same time, he admits, the "fate" of the criminal case brought against Mr. Grushavy after the audit of the fund he led by the Soviet of Security last year is still unknown. "I think that in any case my arrival will be helpful to Belarus." - G. Grushavy shared his opinion of the future. It must be noted that while living abroad the disgraced activist of the Belarusian charity did not lose any time - he was able to create interest in Belarus among his western colleagues and, it seems, gain their support. One of the results of this became the arrival to Minsk of Members of the Helsinki Assembly of Citizens - an organisation with headquarters in Prague and the Hague, and in addition representative offices in more than thirty countries throughout the world. It is planned to open one in Belarus. As the chair of the organisation, Mary Kaldar, announced, HAC was created in 1990 as a movement for dissidents and peace-fighters. The first leader of the organisation became Vatslav Havel. According to Mrs. Kaldar and her Assembly colleagues, Europeans do not have much information about Belarus today. "We know that there is a democratic movement here which in some cases is strongly persecuted" announced participant of Czechoslovakian "Kharti-77" Vatslav Troyan. HAC considers it absolutely necessary to use its experience in educational work with youth, helping the population in "hot spots", prevention of inter-ethnic conflicts and defending human rights.

In early March Genadz Grushavy, together with political scientist Uladzimir Rouda visited Brussels and Moscow where they made contact with representatives of OSCE, human rights defenders and non-governmental organisations. In Brussels a filial of Belarusian Assembly of Non-Governmental Organisations was created and in Moscow a Belarusian-Russian club to defend democracy.

As emphasised during a meeting with journalists, all of the named mutual cooperation has a basis in relationships between individual people as well as NGOs. The original "exchange of Assemblies and ideas" is a result of people of different countries feeling as they are citizens of Europe.

It is revealing that the European guests, showing an interest in the events and situation in Belarus, at the same time made it clear that the possible "disclosure of revolutions" etc. from the side of local authorities does not worry them much.

Yana ZHDANOVICH

FRIENDSHIP WHICH DOES NOT EXIST...

(Continued from page 1)

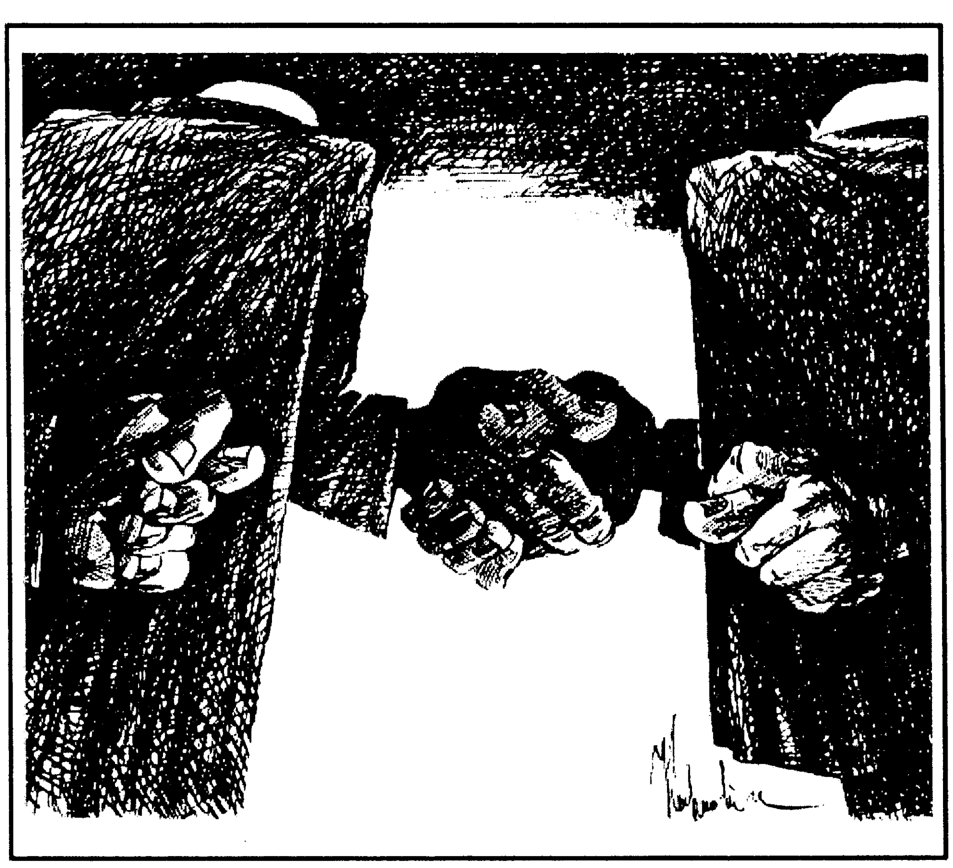
or expressing their discontent with the unceremonious, blatant "unknown people in civilian clothes" (by the way, the picture featured on the front page of this issue was taken on 2 April). Among those arrested and beaten were journalists J. Halip, P. Karhazytsy, Y. Navumenka, V. Davydovsky, V. Schukin, D. Nosau, S. Adamovich, T. Khamitsevich, S. Malinovsky, V. Kostin, as well as Japanese citizen Saito Takafuny...

Participants of the Minsk march had to defend themselves by throwing stones and sticks at the militiamen. As a result 8 militiamen were injured and two of them were taken to hospital in critical condition...

At that time a ball was being held in Moscow and that famous glass was broken "for friendship". That meant that the state which guarded democratic rights and freedoms was unifying with the state in which these rights and freedoms were being suppressed. There were big hopes for the union even though many politicians, economists and independent experts were proving that the union of an elephant and a moska (a little dog from the Russian poem) could not be effective, stable or with perspective.

Today we can say that the predictions were right. Not a single hope was fulfilled, not even the tiny hope about human rights and freedom of speech stipulated in the agreement. Nothing has changed for the better in Belarus during the past year. Belarusian opposition still does not have access to TV media, Belarusian independent radio station was shut down as well as some opposition newspapers including the major one "Svaboda" (Freedom) arrests and court hearings continue. There were also a few widely publicised cases which became known even in the west; for example, the trial of the ORT (Russian television) journalists P. Sharamet and D. Zavadsky, trial of five participants of the meeting dedicated to 79th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic who were prosecuted as criminals, trial of members of "Youth Front" V. Labkovich and A. Shydlousky for their graffiti... it should be mentioned that Russia closed its eyes to problems of human rights and freedom of speech in its satellite state giving Lukashenka carte blanche in this matter. In contrast to Russian politicians, only Russian TV media reacted to events in Belarus. B. Yeltsin expressed his tough position only in the case of the ORT journalists. The rest of the events were "internal matters of Belarus."

The year of friendship between Lukashenka and Russia has passed and many things have become clear and obvious, for example the intentions of the Belarusian president who was underestimate in Russia. His pretensions to the Russian throne have become obvious and unpleasant and his playing with the Russian communist opposition is indecent behaviour... But that is not the main point. The main point is that the union has not brought anything positive to either side, only troubles. Artificial growth of trade between the two countries does not compensate for the losses they obtained as a result of their "friendship". After Russia deprived the president's team of possibilities to make profits on the "open border" (transport into Russia of untaxed vodka, sugar, cars etc.) and demanded to pay back debts for oil and gas Belarus suddenly remembered that they had free military bases and transit. This is the cost to Belarus (billions of dollars) for Lukashenka's participation in Russian politics. One of the latest events (the fall of the Belarusian ruble) caused many to doubt the perspective of the Belarus-Russian Union. President Lukashenka publicly accuse Russia, saying that certain circles wished to carry out a state coup in Belarus... In response, the Russian stock market does not make transactions in Belarusian rubles. Thus Lukashenka's "course" to market socialism and denial of economic reforms has collapsed. Friendship with Lukashenka also brings an anti-Russian mood to Belarus: bad attitude to-wards Lukashenka grows into hostility towards Russia...



As a result the "union" meets its first anniversary in conditions of uncertainty and obscurity. Maybe it is time to stop playing such games and start seeking mutual cooperation? But it might be possible only under a new leadership in Belarus.

Andrei NALIVA

"That is all - the bars are removed!"

Political Prisoner Vadzim Kabanchuk is Free.

The beginning of the last court hearing on Kabanchuk's case started twenty minutes late. It seemed that the judge was reading the verdict with his muffled voice. What was at the end of the last sentence? Perhaps the judge himself did not believe that the verdict could be a three year suspended sentence and not...

...Vadzim Kabanchuk is not being sent anywhere from "Valadarka". He is free. He is coming back to us. Instead of three years of working in almost prison conditions he has gotten two years of deferment...

What, it is not? All of a sudden I realised that it would be the first of the already expressed political verdicts that I would not hear out. Next to me a brave, worried woman was standing - Kabanchuk's mother, who perhaps had not slept for several nights. I was not able to tell her anything. I recalled the manner in which I told Shydlousky's mother not to cry, that even steadfast members of militia Special Forces looked at us... Now it is Kabanchuk... On the side there was Labkovich listening to the verdict.

And the judge's voice was turning more ceremonial... The sentences of both Shydlousky and Labkovich were more severe than even the prosecutor had requested.

The reading of the articles which Kabanchuk had been accused of breaking took place in almost a mesmeric atmosphere. "It would be a disgrace to independent journalism if they were not to get angry and cry out but just peacefully lose consciousness."

But all that disappeared in a jiffy: Kabanchuk is not being sent anywhere from the "Valadarka." He is free. He is coming back to us. Instead of three years of working in almost prison conditions he has gotten two years deferment!..

Vadzim Kabanchuk was detained last autumn. It was almost the middle of October but it seemed more like November. Minsk was freezing. Mins was protesting against hunger and cold. Something happened to warm springs and autumns, as well as to democracy and the rate of the Belarusian ruble.

... having asked about who you are and where you are from, where and why you are in prison, prisoners proceed with: "when will you overthrow the dictator?"...

That October action was called "Against Hunger and Cold." Vadzim Kabanchuk did not manage to return from that event because he was taken to the militia station (of Moscow District of the city of Minsk) and then to the preliminary ward located on Prilukskaia street (it is called "Priluky" among the people). His last "point of destination" was the notorious "Valadarka" on Valadarskaya street...

Kabanchuk spent almost six months inside the antique towers of "Valadarka". As all members of the opposition, Kabanchuk was very popular among the "local inhabitants." There was a time when political prisoners were rare and prison workers said that the political ones spoiled the criminals with their political talk. Now everything is different. Political prisoners have moral superiority and conviction of truth on their side, and at least twenty political prisoners had gone through the wards in the past two years. Our cause is just, which is why we do not fit into the criminal world. Prison is not a place for us to stay. But everything in its own time... Having asked about who you are and where you are from, where and why you are in prison, prisoners proceed with: "when will you overthrow the dictator?"

But relations between supervisors and political prisoners were pretty much the same as between criminals and supervisors. We had troubles. But sometime guards also want to talk, but according to Vadzim it was difficult because of the mental level.

... After a certain period of time this "legend" will become part of the history of Belarus and our children may even have exam questions about Kabanchuk, Shydlousky, Labkovich... Well, by that time we will have a lot to tell them...

At that time prosecution was underway. Militia noticed Kabanchuk's face on videotape taken by them six months ago during a spring demonstration (1997). In the prosecution's opinion, Kabanchuk's participation in actions in Minsk spring 1997 could be qualified as hooliganism and he could be charged with breaking article 201 of Belarusian Criminal Code. Later he was accused of breaking article 186 (participation in mass actions followed by hooliganism) and article 187 part 2 (resisting militia with aggressive actions). The same accusations were put forward to seven Ukrainians who marched with us during "Chernobyl Shlyakh". Militiamen called all of those young people "terrorists." It is interesting that later a militiaman named Dubavitsky (Ukrainian by nationality) will stand as a witness in court during hearings of both the Ukrainians and Kabanchuk. They all even went through the same ward. Kabanchuk stayed at the ward where Slava Goch once stayed. "Legends" of those political prisoners are still passed down in that prison. That is logical. After a certain period of time this "legend" will become part of the history of Belarus and our children may even have exam questions about Kabanchuk, Shydlousky, Labkovich... Well, by that time we will have a lot to tell them.

Court hearings of Kabanchuk's case started on the eve of Catholic Annunciation and anniversary of Belarusian People's Republic. That day was also the start of "Minsk - Spring 98" with all of the natural and street phenomenon and in Minsk court people were recollecting and talking about the events of the spring of 1997. The president of Belarus had just issued a decree on mass demonstrations.

A day before the meeting and march Minsk City Executive Council banned gatherings at Independence Square and not a single newspaper managed to publish that. So, people went to Independence Square, some people went to the Catholic Church (on Independence Square) because it was Catholic Annunciation. An organiser of the demonstration Mr. Semenjaka was arrested by authorities beforehand. Events of that day are quite well known: in November 1997 they were used against five participants. As for Kabanchuk, he was charged with taking part in an incident near apartment number 18 on Skorina Avenue where he allegedly hit several times an unidentified militiaman (who was in civilian clothes). Sounds serious. And that militiaman was not identified anywhere and did not bring a suit against Kabanchuk, who "hit" him all over his body.

Another date which brought Kabanchuk into prison was 10 March. At that time demonstrators were picketing with the motto: "Yes to friendship of peoples, no to annexation and occupation!" in honour of Russian representatives coming from the Duma, who had al-ready been integrating with Belarus for a year. According to prosecutors instead of staying in the allowed places (the picket spot) from 6 p.m. to 8p.m. Kabanchuk was marching on the street with young friends "breaking traffic regulations". Militiaman Kalakolchykau appeared in court as a witness and testified that Kabanchuk had hit him in the back.

Kabanchuk pleaded guilty only partially. He was not simply hitting militiamen but defending a young man (unknown to him) who was being severely beaten by militiamen while they were walking from Independence Square to Jakub Kolas Square. On 10 March militia provoked the people picketing by pus-

hing them out into Skarina Avenue,this became clear from the mixed up testimony of the militiamen witnesses. This happened an hour before the picket was scheduled to end.

> ***...Cannot help recollecting that the fact that victim Kalakolchykau as well as witness Dubavetsky came from Russia. This is just a trifle...It was noticed that Belarusian militiamen lied with the same frequency...***

By the way, some words about the permission to picket. An interesting document appeared in the hands of the court signed by deputy Mayor of Minsk V. Chykina. When people gathered on Independence Square, the deputy mayor changed his mind quickly in a revolutionary way and did not give his official "yes" to the picketing as if feeling "that people would not follow order" (in the documentation, he had done this: "since the militia could not provide security for the event..."). It is strange that the "Bolshevik" did not appear in court to testify on his feelings (by the way, he is a leader of one of the two Belarusian Communist Parties). He probably decided to go underground because of his new feelings.

Some more words about the documents in the case of Kabanchuk. According to some documents, prosecutors organised enquiries about any damages to state service companies caused by the graduate of the Auto/Tractor Faculty of the Polytechnical Academy Kabanchuk when he was stopping traffic. Transportation services responded that none of their transportation was stopped on the streets. In a letter, a prosecutor asked "Minskpasazhirautotrans" whether there were any stops or delays in movement of trolleybuses on Skorina Avenue. The abovementioned agen-cy responded that there were no chan-ges of routes because of the demonstration.

Suddenly the authorities showed their interest in the cleanliness of our capital (as Tatiana Stankevich - advocate of Kabanchuk - pointed out "The authorities did not show such interest after the celebration of the Day of the Republic thought the river Svisloch was full of empty bottles.). Soon authorities understood that the demonstrators did not have a "criminal past". An attempt to accuse them of making a mess in the capital turned into a complete fiasco.

Serge Kalakolchykau was born in Russia and then came to Belarus. For the past ten years he has worked as an expert in the militia at the time when the Belarusian Popular Front was established, Belarus became independent and meetings became a normal thing in Belarus. Now his activities were aimed at the white-red-white flags which authorities considered as consequences of BPF activities. And there was Kalakolchykau with his video-camera.

He testified in court that during demonstrations people were insulting him with bad words, and even spitting in his face. On the day of that demonstration Kalakolchykau had no idea about time and aims of the demonstration and ways to solve the problems. He saw only "chains for terrorists" composed of Minsk students who "were ready to crush everything" and "lack of brains in their eyes" (he testified in such a linguistic style). He does not know who exactly hit the militiaman but states that the person could have been Kabanchuk. Kalakolchykau was "rescued" by two militiamen from Special Forces when he got into the hands of young demonstrators.

Three militiamen - Ganchar, Korzal, Dubavitsky - "politely" insulted young participants during the court hearings.

> ***... All who apparently worked "at a call of their hearts" in fact worked for their salaries and they had to hide their sympathy towards people like Kabanchuk...***

Mikhail Dubavitsky showed his eagerness in this case "telling" that the deputy chair of "Youth Front" Yaugen Skochka was trying to take the camera from his hands. But at that time Yaugen was serving his three day sentence after the events that took place on March 22 (march on Skorina Avenue).

It is logical to show that during Dubavitsky's testimony (while he was pronouncing the words), Skochka was being driven back and forth from the KGB to the prosecutors and had an "explanatory conversation" in which they used many times the word "Valadarka"... Cannot help recollecting that the fact that victim Kalakolchykau as well as witness Dubavitsky came from Russia. This is just a trifle... It was noticed that Belarusian militiamen lied with the same frequency...

Vadzim Kabanchuk, during the hearings, claimed that he was ready for any sentence and responded "I do not know." When asked whether he had seen anyone else hit or stop transport. I think all who apparently worked "at a call of their hearts" in fact worked for their salaries and they where just cogs in the machine but deep inside they had to hide their sympathy and respect towards people like Kabanchuk.

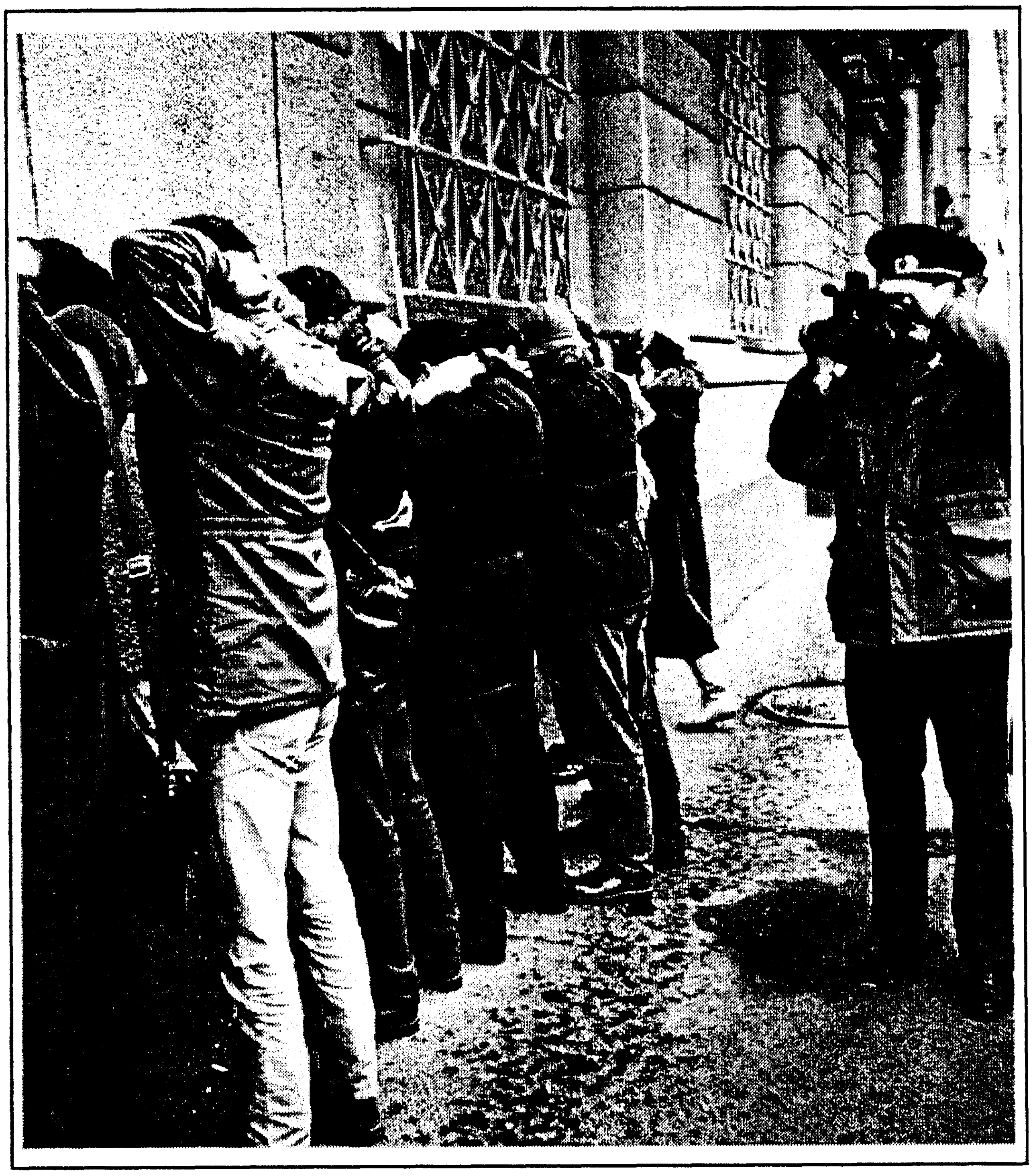
In fact it is a big surprise that Vadzim received two years suspension though certainly it would be better if he was fully justified. But still...

When he was freed, his first words were "Long live Belarus!" Holy words for every citizen of Belarus. In a few minutes Vadzim was reading a rhyme to us that had been written by his friend Shydlousky in prison:

That is all - I will be free,
That is all -
the bars are removed!
That is all -
I am breathing freedom...

Unfortunately, we do not yet know the end of the rhyme...

Tatiana SNITKO



Politics Facts Comments

(continued from page 1)

On 17 March, president A. Lukashenka gave a speech, the thesis of which was full of threats addressed to the opposition which intensifies even more the already unbearable atmosphere of fear, hatred and distrust in Belarusian society.

On 18 March, the court declared not guilty deputy and journalist V. Schukin, who had been held up by militia and accused of organising as unauthorised meeting by the court house where the trial was being held for political prisoners V. Labkovich and A. Shydlousky.

On 19-20 March, in the Soviet district court of the city of Minsk material was considered in the administrative case brought against chairman of BSDP (Belarusian Social-Democrats Party, of People's Gramada) Mikola Statkevich for "not ensuring order during the march on Constitution Day, 15 March, which he had organised. The judge A. Tamanov admitted that M. Statkevich's actions were in no way criminal and closed the case.

On 20 March in Mogilev, members of the "Youth Front" Ales Asiptsov and Zmitsez Novikav were taken in by militia without grounds or charges.

On 20 March, as written in the newspaper "Navini", political prisoners of Belarus founded the Belarusian Association of victims of the Lukashenka regime - there are already 12 members.

On 20 March Minsk City Executive Council forbade "Citizens' Forum" - the youth organisation of the United Citizens Party - to hold a march on which they would visit embassies of European countries.

In March a few pickets were held in Minsk in defence of arrested deputy of the Supreme Soviet 13th session, entrepreneur A. Klimau. The last one took place 20 March. Participants of this activity included deputies of the Supreme Soviet A. Dabravolsky, L. Graznova, A. Lyabedska and others as well as relatives and close friends of Klimau. The children of Klimau - eight year old Stas and three year old Alenka held posters with "Give papa back to us!" and "Where is my daddy!" During the picket signatures were gathered to free the deputy. By the way, A. Klimau's lawyer Vera Stramkovskaia stated that his arrest was directly connected to his political, not his business activities.

On 21 March, while leaving for a meeting and march on Minsk in recognition of the 80th anniversary of the creation of the Belarusian People's Republic, members of the Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne" in Vitebsk V. Pleschanka, B. Khamaida and Y. Maroz were arrested. But since they had not committed any criminal act, they were released.

On 22 March after the meeting and march to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the creation of the Belarusian People's Republic held by the Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne" and other anti-government forces, the following people were arrested under no grounds:

Journalists:
1. Al'gerg Nievyarovsky of the newspaper "Naviny"
2. Yagor Mayorchyk, "Belaruskaia Gazeta"
3. Ruslan Batsyankov

Observers from Helsinki Committee:
4. Zmider Marushevsky
5. Yagor Guk
6. Chyrvony

participants of the procession and meeting:
7. Barys Khamaida, editor of the newspaper "Vybar" (Choice), resident of Vitebsk, sentenced 24 March to 10 days arrest in Lenin District Court of Minsk, member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
8. Uladzimir Pleschanka, chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne" of Vitebsk. Sentenced 24 March to 10 days arrest in Lenin District Court of Minsk.
9. Yuri Maroz, resident of Vitebsk, invalid of the 3rd category, ill (heart disease), sentenced 24 March to 10 days arrest in Lenin District Court of Minsk.
10. Palina Panasyuk, resident of Brest, held overnight in a holding cell, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk, member of the Central Rada of "Youth Front", member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
11. Nadzeya Yarmishyna, resident of village Brodyacin, Malaritsky district of Brest Region. Held overnight in a holding cell, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk, member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
12. Ganna Tsypkailo, resident of Brest, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk, member of the Central Rada of "Youth Front", member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
13. Siargei Bakhun, resident of Brest held overnight in a holding cell, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk to a fine of five million BRB (20 minimum wages), member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
14. Victar Vatnin, Brest resident, held overnight in a holding cell, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk to a fine of 500,000 BRB, member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
15. Valery Kisel', Brest resident, held overnight in holding cell, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk, member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
16. Siarzhuk Gryn, Brest resident, held overnight in holding cell, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk, member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
17. Yas Abadovsky, Mogilev resident, held overnight in holding cell, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk, member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
18. Zmicer Anapel', Gomel resident, held overnight in holding cell, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk, member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
19. Vasil Galavatsky, resident of Navapolatsk, Vitebsk Region spent the night in Soviet District militia station, Minsk, released at 4 a.m. with no protocol and no explanation. Member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
20. Leanid Vitkovsky, Brest resident. Held in militia station of Soviet District, Minsk for five hours -released with no protocol and no explanation, member of BPF "A".
21. Yuri Golubiev, Navapolatsk, Vitebsk region, Held in militia station of Soviet District, Minsk for five hours - released with no protocol and no explanation, member of BPF "A".
22. Andrei Matsuk, Navapolatsk resident. Arrested by unkown people in civilian clothing, taken to militia station of Soviet District, Minsk - held for five hours and released without protocol. Member of Central Rada "Youth Front" and member of BPF "A".
23. Vital' Kuplevich, resident of village Radun', Grodno region. Arrested and held for five hours in militia station, Soviet District, Minsk.The reason for holding him was not clarified, released without protocol. Member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
24. Zmitcier Talchkov, Minsk resident. Arrested and transported to militia station of Soviet District, Minsk where he was held for five hours. He was made to write an explanation (?) after which he was released without protocol.
25. Andrei Nikalaev, resident of Navapolatsk. Arrested and transported to militia station of Soviet District, Minsk where he was held for five hours. Later he was released without protocol. Member of Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
26. Pavel Pakhmanov, juvenile, 15 years old. Member of "Youth Front".
27. Yuri Astrovsky, juvenile, member of "Youth Front".

On 24 March - arrested:
Yavgen Skochka, sentenced by Central District Court of Minsk to three days arrest. Deputy chair of "Youth Front" member of "Soima" Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne".
Tsimafey Dranchuk, juvenile.

On 24 March - arrested:
Yas' Abadovsky, member of "Youth Front", taken by unknown people in civilian dress to Kurapaty where he was threatened - if he will continue such activities he will be left there forever.

On 24 March directors of the library of Minsk Automobile Factory refused to allow the Factory Rada Comaradary of Belarusian Language to hold 27.03.98 a previously approved discussion on the history and culture of Belarus. Those in power consider the history of Belarus a "dangerous" topic for general discussion.

On 24 March in Grodno Region the court case of ORT (Russian television station) journalists P. Sharamet and D. Zavadsky were heard. The judicial colleagues, led by judge A. Grynkevich, decided not to overturn the decision of Ashmyany District Court. Lawyer of P. Sharamet Gary Paganyaila announced that if the Supreme Court does not overturn the decision, he will take it to the International Human Rights Committee which is headquartered in Geneva.

On 28 March the trial being held in Minsk City Court of political prisoner V. Kabanchuk ended. He had spent half a year in jail. The court sentenced him to three years imprisonment which was to be suspended for two years.

Resolution of United States Congress

In Relation to Belarus

The problem of following human rights in Belarus causes concern in democratic countries around the world. On 6 March, the House of Representatives of the USA Congress considered the resolution №237 in which it estimates the situation in Belarus. Following in the text of the resolution.

Expressing a deep concern with the limitation of human rights and civil freedoms in Belarus including lack of implementation of obligations to OSCE, we urge the President (Clinton - ed.) to take into consideration the facts while determining the most favourable trade status for Belarus taking into consideration

· that Belarus is a country with ten million population and a member of OSCE;

· that the situation with human rights has been deteriorating from the moment president Lukashenka came into power in 1994, when he turned around the process of democratisation and guaranties of human rights in the post-Soviet period;

· that president Lukashenka has been constantly increasing the authority of the executive branch and broke the by taking power from the legislative and judicial branches;

· that the referendum of 1996, that was used by the president to obtain more authority above the parliament and the judicial branch, the referendum was held with violations of the 1994 constitution and cannot be considered legitimate;

· that the Belarusian Supreme Soviet in 1995 elected, in accordance with the 1994 constitution, is still the only legitimate parliament of Belarus;

· that after holding a referendum in November 1996, president Lukashenka dismissed the Supreme Soviet. He formed a new House of Representatives which is subordinate to him and he used it for ratification of his decrees;

· that the Parliamentary Assembly of OSCE recognised the Supreme Soviet as the only legitimate parliament of Belarus;

· that the principle of division of powers, established by the constitution of 1994 and corresponding with the principles of all developed countries does not exist in Belarus and president Lukashenka rules with the help of decrees;

· that the Constitutional Court is under full presidential control and independence of the judicial branch is not guaranteed;

· that Belarusian government continues to break obligations on human rights established by OSCE, especially freedom of expression, meeting and associations and freedom of mass media;

· that the freedom of speech and mass media are seriously limited, including subordination of some mass media to the presidential administration, arrests of journalists, closure of newspapers and independent radio stations;

· that in November 1997, newspaper "Svaboda" (printed in Belarusian language) the biggest independent was shut down by the administration that Lukashenka's government takes actions against criticism of the regime; citizens who criticise the president and government run the risk of exile, terrorising and arrest;

· that non-governmental organisations in Belarus run the risk of tax auditor checks and sharp increase of rental rates;

· that the Belarusian SOROS Foundation, which from 1993 was supporting educational, humanitarian and cultural projects of mass media (13 million US dollars) was forced to close his office in Minsk in September 1997 as a result of Belarusian government campaign directed against the foundation;

· that limitation of freedom of gatherings has sharply increased in 1996 and 1997;

· that militia, without authority, disperse opposition demonstrations and very often use force, arrests of protesting people and passers by;

· that the Belarusian government agreed on September 18, 1997, to open OSCE mission in Belarus task of which is to help Belarusian authorities to support democratic institutions and fulfil the obligations to OSCE and monitoring of this process;

· that on 18 December, 1997 the Belarusian government signed a memorandum on mutual understanding with OSCE according to which the mission's activities in Belarus became possible;

· that the OSCE mission can make a valuable contribution into the work of Belarusian government on bettering the human rights situation, and by doing this coming out of isolation from the international community;

· that Belarus has most favourable trade status according to the amendment to Jackson-Venik Trade Act of 1974;

House of Representatives (and then the Senate) considered said resolution. The Senate -

1. Expresses concern about serious limitations of human rights and civil freedoms in Belarus.
2. Urges Belarusian government to follow the principles laid down in the constitution of 1994 in practice and in intentions.
3. Urges Belarusian government to fulfil the obligations taken on according the Helsinki Act and following agreements with OSCE and other international obligations.
4. Urges Belarusian president Aleksander Lukashenka to re-establish the authority of the Supreme Soviet.
5. Urges the president of the United States, State Secretary, USA Embassy in Minsk US mission to the UN, and US mission of OSCE to use any possibility, personal and public, in order to aim the actions of the Belarusian government at respecting human right, including norms and principles of OSCE.
6. Support development of independent non-governmental organisations in Belarus which contribute to development of democracy and act with respect to basic rights and human freedoms;
7. Welcomes the work of the OSCE mission on sustaining development of democratic institutions in Belarus and urge Belarusian government to cooperate with the mission;

and also

8. Urges the President (Clinton - ed.) to take into consideration the violations of human rights in Belarus when determining the most favourable trade status for Belarus and if the situation will not improve, then we urge the President not to renew non-discriminatory status on Blelarusian products.

6 March, 1998



Photos: Fashion "Minsk Spring"

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From the Inside of the "Valadarka"

Colony

Our "Stolypin" train took almost a day and night to get from Minsk to a little town in Mogilev region. Militia car "Uazik" and a car for transporting prisoners (autozek) were waiting for us. We were quickly checked and divided in to several groups in accordance with our sentences.

Eight people and I were pushed into the "Uazik" and though it was not comfortable, somewhere deep inside I felt a relief because I could see through the windows people, streets and sun - things I really needed in "Valadarka".

In half an hour we came to a little town of Staraselje. There were two barracks behind barbed wire (one of them was for the administration), check point and outhouse. That was the colony UZH 15-18. The major, who was escorting us, gave documentation of our cases to the officer on duty and gave an order to another one to search us once again. After that we were let into the territory of the colony. I was put into room number four on the second floor. There were four empty beds on the top bunk and one on the bottom (a dead body had been taken away an hour ago). The first night I slept without a mattress or blanket.

As I understood, winter months were the most severe to live through for inhabitants of the colony. Barracks were overcrowded but there was no work for prisoners. What would one expect if there are thousands of unemployed people outside of prison. Jobs come up only when spring arrives when collective farms of the Mogilev region start to sow. In contrast to prison, in the colony one does not get a set portion of food every day so you have to feed yourself. When you come there, you receive 20,000 Belarusian rubles in order to survive when they are looking for a job for you. Eighty percent of colony inhabitants are usually jobless so they have to eat mixed fodder brought by those working at animal farms. They make pancakes and porridge of sifted mixed fodder and water.

Soon I understood that life in the colony is easier for those who get packages from friends or relatives (in contrast to prison, here you can receive as many as relatives can afford to send). What about those who do not have any possibility to get anything from the outside world?

During our first evening check-up, deputy chair of our colony told us that two prisoners had escaped from hospital and "from this day no one will be able to go hospital in case he needs to. And for me it is better when a prisoner dies in the colony because I just have to order a coffin and do not have problems sleeping at night."

The next day I got acquainted with "oper" (militiaman). In fact, he tried to persuade people to work with him and sign an obligation. It was nothing but recruitment. His tactics were simple, he picked up a few men who had a long sentence in the colony and played on cutting that sentence if the prisoner would agree to cooperate with him. If you refuse you can easily be put in the punishment where horrors of the middle ages still remain. There you have to put some food out for the huge rats so that they will not eat you. It is not surprising that fifty percent of inhabitants are stool-pigeons. A few days after my arrival here, I understood that I had no rights. I just had obligations about which I was reminded with every step. There are no limits to the power of the militiamen here. Though every month a regional prosecutor comes here, the leaders of the colony know about it beforehand.

So, they force prisoners to clean everything in the morning. Obviously unsanitary rooms are locked. They forbid dirty prisoners to show themselves before the prosecutor. Actually, the servant of law never asked us when we had last been to the banya (Russian sauna). Maybe because there is no banya in the colony and the cold water runs only for one hour in the morning on the first floor. However, there are about three thousand prisoners in the colony (at least that was the case in March 1997). No one has the courage to complain about such awful conditions. In the first place, you will hear the answer "we will figure it out", secondly - you will put your existence into more awful conditions they will not forgive you your complaints.

I recollected "Valadarka." At last I understood cries of dissatisfaction of prisoners when the last amnesty was announced. They were lined up and read the amnesty. The punishment remained the same, but the regime was eased. But the thing is, the better the regime, the more severe the militiamen and imprisonment is made for you. All regimes are nearly the same. The difference is that there are certain limitations on amount of packages and money transfers and meetings with relatives.

In our colony with a strict regime, all of these things are unlimited and the strict regime was made by the very administration. It is impossible to receive money from relatives on time. When they receive the money, they give it to the people they want to and they can hold it. The same happens with letters. Militiamen take them and read them and then they keep them. It is insulting when someone receives a letter with news about the death of a prisoner's relative, because the head takes that letter and gives it to the prisoner late. And that prisoner is detained in the barracks for a couple of days so that he would not attempt to escape.

For almost a week I was walking around the colony and doing nothing until militiamen called upon me and said "Tomorrow you will go to work."

Mikola KACHAN

(continuation to follow)



(continuation from volumes 2, 3 and 5)

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